

DINTON AND ITS HERMIT.



Dinton Castle. (1)

Some four miles from Aylesbury, on the left of the road from Oxford to that town, lies the picturesque village of Dinton. This was one of the many lordships (184 in Kent, and 255 in other counties) given by the Conqueror to his half-brother, Odo, Bishop of Bayeux. It stands pleasantly embowered in trees and is inhabited by Boeotians, who confine their interest in mundane matters to butter, calves, and ducks. In their eyes the fall of a penny in butter or the rise of sixpence in ducks is much more important than the establishment of the kingdom of Italy, or the expulsion of Maximilian from Mexico. The cholera might decimate London disregarded, if the rinderpest did not reach Aylesbury market.

In this parish is the hamlet of Merton, which tradition asserts to be one of the nine manors that Queen Emma bestowed on the Church in

gratitude for her escape from the ordeal of red-hot ploughshares.

Upton is another hamlet in Dinton, and was once the property of Osney Abbey, but after the dissolution of the monasteries, was given to Chief Justice Baldwin. He might have been a supple courtier, but he was not a profound lawyer, for his learned brother Dyer, afterwards Chief Justice too, in reporting a case, says, "but Baldwin C. J., was of another opinion and differed from his brethren, though neither I, nor any one else, I believe, understood his reasoning," — complimentary that from the Bar to the Bench.

The young men of Upton in 1606 gave a Communion-table to Dinton church, as is witnessed by their initials cut thereon. Most probably before their gift, a stone table had been used in its place.

In excavating the foundations for a building in this parish, many skeletons were found, one of which had a spear sticking in his throat. This showed that his death was sudden, and but shortly anticipated his burial. The vicinity abounds in the remains of camps, Celtic, Roman, Saxon, Danish (notably at Merton large field in this parish), so that skirmishes must have been frequent. By the style of a glass bottle found in the vicinity, these skeletons were most probably those of Britons.

Like other villages, Dinton boasts of a church and manor-house, both well worthy of notice. The church is more especially remarkable for its doorway within the porch, which is a fine specimen of early Norman work, similar in style to that of Lund Cathedral in Sweden.

Dinton Hall is on the west of the church. It is a fine old mansion, of which the earlier part dates from the reign of James the First. Amongst the curiosities preserved there, is a sword which is said to have belonged to Oliver Cromwell, who left it there on the night of the 8th of November, 1645. He had slept there but his slumbers were rudely disturbed in the morning by the approach of some Royalists from the garrison at Boarstall, who had heard of his being there, and

hoped “to catch the weasel asleep.” Instead of capturing “Red Nosed Noll,” they caught a Tartar. Troop had been hastily summoned from the Roundhead garrison at Aylesbury, who intercepted the Royalists on their return, and the latter retreated to Boarstall with the loss of four men, seven horses, four cases of pistols, and two carabines.

There is also a curious and highly-finished key, with a crown and cipher at the bow. It is said by some to have been a pass-key, but by others to have been a personal ornament worn by an attendant on the bed-chamber of the king. The delicacy of its details shows that it could never have been put to any actual use; and the Lord Chamberlain to this day wears a key embroidered on his coat.

Notwithstanding its vicinity to Oxford, this part of the country was the head-quarters of the Parliamentary troops. John Hampden’s house was not five miles off, and two of the king’s judges lived in the very parish of Dinton. The one was Sir Richard Ingoldsby, son of Elizabeth Cromwell, daughter of Sir Oliver Cromwell, and aunt to the brewer of Huntingdon. He was governor of Oxford, one of Cromwell’s lords, and his signature may be seen amongst those of the regicides who put their hands to the warrant for the execution of “the Man Charles Stuart.” When the cause of Richard Cromwell became desperate from the unassuming nature of his character, Ingoldsby, seeing that the game was up, was among the first who “ratted” to the side of the exiled king. He had been called “Honest Dick Ingoldsby” by Henry Cromwell, Lord Deputy, and when he deserted their cause, he took no half-measures. He endeavoured to persuade Whitlocke, who had the custody of the Great Seal, to carry it over to Charles the Second. As he could not do that, he surprised Windsor Castle, in which there was a great store of arms and ammunition. He displaced the garrison, and held it for the king. He secured Lambert, and brought back many of the troops that would have joined him on the road. He so effectually turned the scale in favour of the Royal cause, that he was one of the chief aids to the Restoration. He was the only one of the regicides who obtained a free, unconditional pardon, and so strongly recommended himself by well-timed pecuniary advances to the royal

treasures, that he was created a Knight of the Bath before the long-deferred coronation.

The severity with which Charles the Second treated the regicides (although they would have treated him worse, if they had caught him) was very impolitic. The Bourbons acted more wisely by forgetting all that passed in the interval between their expulsion and restoration. The revolutionary and imperial exbishop of Autun became the confidential adviser of His Most Catholic Majesty. The erection of the scaffold in front of Whitehall had been a false move on the part of the Parliamentary party. From that day began a reaction in favour of monarchy and of the exiled house — a reaction that never ceased until the king was again seated in Whitehall. When the son of the Martyr enjoyed his own again, he copied the errors of his opponents.

Robert Blake is one of the purest characters in English history. All that bigoted intolerance could urge against him was, that he advanced the glory of his country, under the orders of one who was *de facto*, if not *de jure*, King of England. For this his festering corpse was dragged to Tyburn. It was long believed, through the prescient forethought of the Protector —and it would have been a piece of exquisite irony, if true—that the corpse of King Charles was the recipient of the indignities intended to be bestowed on that of Protector Oliver.

The regicides who escaped the punishment inflicted on their fellows must have dragged out a miserable existence. They had to seek refuge in the most extraordinary and secluded hiding-places, compared to which the oak of Boscobel was a bed of roses. The story is well known, how that, when a band of wild Indians had attacked a Puritan settlement in New England, and the colonists were manfully yielding ground inch by inch to superior numbers only, their sinking courage was recruited by the sudden appearance of an unknown old man, who, appearing to spring from the earth, led them on to victory. He was one of the regicides who had long lived on unknown and unsuspected existence in the village.

Simon Mayne, the then lord of the manor of Dinton, was another of the king's judges. He was member for Aylesbury in the Long Parliament, and during the Protectorate continued to be one of the committee for Bucks, "wherein he licked his fingers and was a constant rumper to the last."* After the Restoration he was specially exempted from the Act of Pardon and Indemnity passed in the twelfth year of the king's reign, with a provision that, upon a conviction, the king might suspend the execution of the sentence, but his estates must be forfeited. He was tried with fourteen others, amongst whom was Waller, who were all in the same predicament, at the Old Bailey, on the 16th of October, 1660. He was found guilty and remanded to the Tower, and remained in confinement until released by death in the next year. His body was removed to Dinton, and buried there on the 18th of April, 1661. Notwithstanding his exception in the above act of Parliament, his son Simon was allowed to remain in possession of his paternal estates, and to devise them to his own son. It was not known how this was effected; but everything, even pardon for the murder of the First, was venal at the court of the Second Charles.



The Dinton Hermit.

It is said that Simon Mayne managed to elude the searches made after him by a singular contrivance, which is, or was very lately, to be seen. This was a secret hiding-place at the top of the mansion, under the gables of the roof, to which he ascended by a passage or tunnel lined with cloth. Three of the lower steps of an ordinary staircase were capable of being lifted up, and thereby formed an entrance to a trough, through which he could crawl up to his hiding-place.

Simon Mayne had for clerk, when he acted as justice of the peace in Dinton, one John Bigg, native of the same. According to local tradition, he was the actual executioner of King Charles. He was a man of considerable wealth, and a pretty good scholar; but after the Restoration he grew melancholy, and betook himself to a recluse life. Like David at the court of King Achish of Gath, "he changed his behaviour before them, and feigned himself mad." For several years of the later part of his life he lived in a cave, though it was said that during the summer months he used to bivouac in the beechwoods that then covered the Chiltem Hills. This lasted until his death in 1696. His method of mending his clothes — which he never shifted after the return of the king — was by fastening fresh cloth or leather over the decayed parts. One of his shoes is yet to be seen in the Museum at Dinton Hall, and the other is preserved in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. They were mended as above-mentioned until the leather became of more than tenfold thickness. In the course of last century the ground in the vicinity of his grave (which is still pointed out on the south-west of the hall) was carefully turned over, but nothing of any importance was found.

It is certain that Hulett (who was the only person ever tried for the murder of the king) was not the actual perpetrator of the deed, for he was, after condemnation, pardoned, upon the ground that the judges were not satisfied with the verdict. If the judges of those days thought any verdict to be grounded upon insufficient evidence, there must have been very slight evidence indeed produced upon the trial.

Neither was it Brandon, whose memory Hulett maligned to save his own life. Hulett tried to shift the burden upon the shoulders of a dead man, who could neither be hurt by the accusation nor bring evidence to show that it was false. It was probably done by some person whose antecedents removed all suspicion from him, and the secret has been well kept.

In ‘The Adventures of Captain Dangerous’*** there was an incident that always puzzled me. The Captain is supposed to be the grandson of a female Ravallac who had shot at Oliver Cromwell. For this she was only imprisoned; in an out-of-the-way place, in company with a man deprived of his right hand. From the context he was manifestly the executioner; whom we want. The first point evidently is borrowed from the legendary tradition, that the Man in the Iron Mask induced a lady to share his captivity, and the result was a son, who was despatched to Corsica, and there became the grandfather of the well-known lieutenant of artillery. The absurdity of this fable is so apparent that it leads me to mistrust the other point *in re* the man with a velvet-covered stump.

All parish registers contain extraneous entries of more or less historical importance. Mr. Troutbeck’s receipt for the cure of a mad dog is to be found in those of North Allerton. Dinton registers contain an entry that, on the 26th of March, 1635, licence was given to Simon Mayne and his wife to eat flesh on fish days. The burial of John Bigg is simply entered thus, under the head of burials:— “John Bigg, April 4.” This concise entry makes me distrust, in this case, the importance usually to be assigned to local tradition. Had such a report existed at the time of the burial, some memorial of the fact would most likely have been introduced along with the registered entry.

Manchester was not enfranchised, nor a systematic registration established, until the reign of William IV. Cottonopolis, however, returned members to Cromwell’s Parliament. The first page of the above-mentioned register at Dinton contains an entry under the hand of Simon Mayne, that he had as justice of the peace, appointed one

Richard Ayres, a shoemaker, to keep the same, by virtue of an act of Parliament passed in 1653. for the purpose of securing a more complete system of registration. This act of Parliament was at the Restoration considered null and void, as wanting the assent of the third branch of the Legislature. So nearly two centuries elapsed before that consent was obtained to any such useful measure.

* My Story of the Good Old Cause, 1660.

** Under the engraving from which this illustration is taken, the following inscription is given: — "Iohn Bigg, the Dinton Hermit, baptised 22nd April, 1629, buried 4th April, 1696. Browne Willis gives the following particulars of this man out of a letter written to him by Thos. Herne, dated Oxon, Feby. 12, 1712.— "He was formerly Clerk to Simon Mayne, of Dinton, one of the Judges who passed Sentence on King Charles the First. He lived at Dinton (co. Bucks), in a Cave, had been a Man of tolerable wealth, was looked upon as a pretty good Scholar, and of no contemptable parts. Upon the Restoration he grew Melancholly, betook himself to a recluse life, and lived by charity, but never asked for anything but Leather, which he would immediately nail to his Clothes. He kept three bottles that hung to his Girdle— viz., for Strong and Small Beer and Milk. His Shoes are still preserved; they are very large, and made up of about a thousand patches of Leather. One of them is in the Bodleian Repository, the other in the Collection of Sir John Vanhatten, of Dinton, who had his Cave dug up some years since, in hopes of discovering something relative to him, but without success. This print is etched from a picture in the possession of Scroop Bermand, Esq., of Nether Winchendon, Bucks. Published Dec. 10th, 1787, by W. Richardson, at his ancient and modern print warehouse, No. 174, Strand."

***By Sala, in the "Temple Bar Magazine."

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